

# A Way of Life



STAGE TWO: *Community with Others*

***A Way of Life***  
**Stage 2: Community with Others**

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*Helping you discover who God is, who you are,  
and what God wants to do through you.*





# A WAY OF LIFE

## Stage 2: Community with Others

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A WAY OF LIFE: STAGE TWO

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# Preface

## THE PROCESS AT A GLANCE

VantagePoint3's *A Way of Life* encourages greater attention to and alignment with God's gracious way in your life, your community, and the world. Three overarching themes structure the learning: friendship with God, community with others, and mission on the way. At its core, *A Way of Life* invites you into a set of reflections, practices, and relationships that help you explore and sustain a way of life faithful to God's good work.

Stage 1: *Friendship with God* invited us to pay attention to a life of growing intimacy/communion with God. Over the next two months or so, Stage 2: *Community with Others* will invite us to pay attention to a life of being with others as God's people. Stage 3: *Mission on the Way* will invite us to pay attention to a life of being sent by God into the world.

## STAGE 2 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Christine Pohl's book *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Eerdmans, 2012) was very instructive in sorting out the practices that are fundamental to Christian community. Her discussions on gratitude, truthfulness, and hospitality pointed us toward the critical importance of these three practices for living faithfully in community (Sessions 2–4). We also want to say thanks to Vic Gordon for his collaboration with the content and process of discovering our spiritual gifts (Session 5).

## PRAYER OF EXAMEN

We will continue to adopt the practice of prayerfully reviewing our week. Our hope is that through this practice we might become more intentional and more skilled in paying attention with God to the everydayness of our lives. Some participants might find it more helpful to adopt a daily prayer of examen during Stage 2 (optional).



## **BIBLE READING & JOURNALING**

We will continue reading together John's gospel throughout Stage 2. Continue to pay particular attention to Jesus' relationship with the Father in your reading. Utilize the journaling pages in the back for recording one's thoughts and prayers and wonderings.

## **SUPPLEMENTAL STAGE 2 BOOK**

L. Gregory Jones and Célestin Musekura's *Forgiving As We've Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace* (IVP, 2010) will supplement the content and process of our Stage 2 manual. We will be discussing the book and the critical importance of forgiveness to Christian community and witness in Session 7. Read with both a critical mind and a prayerful spirit.

## **MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS**

Continue to meet regularly with your mentor. We pray that this relationship can be a safe place where we can continue to unpack our lives and "learnings" along the way. Throughout Stages 2 and 3, we also want to establish *mutual mentoring groups* within your *A Way of Life* group. These smaller groups (preferably three people per group, four if necessary) will meet together for 15–30 minutes each week, preferably right before or during the regular group time. Their purpose is, very simply, to *care for one another* as companions on this journey: we will listen to one another, ask questions of one another, and pray for one another. They will be introduced and explained in Session 1: Called to Community (pages 15–16).

## **WHAT WE CARE ABOUT**

We are committed to the good work of fostering depth and igniting faithful service by providing churches and organizations transformative processes that help people discover in a deeper way who God is, who they are, and what God desires to do through them. In cooperation with the Spirit's leading and work, we hope to see:

- Individuals particularized, awakened and ignited for Kingdom life and influence
- Christian leaders paying greater attention to those around them
- Churches and organizations becoming vital places of learning
- A growing tribe of Christian leaders gripped by a more relational way of doing life and ministry

We believe God is already up to something very good in your life and community, something that calls forth from you a response with the whole of your life (Ephesians 2:10).

*Blessings on the journey,*  
The VantagePoint<sup>3</sup> Team

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## *In Preparation for Session 1*

### ***Part 1 – Bible Reading and Journaling: Gospel of John***

For next week, read and reflect upon John 7:1–52. In addition to simply paying attention to what grabs you within the passage, ask a couple focused questions: *What does this passage tell me about Jesus' relationship with the Father? What can I learn from Jesus' relationship with the Father, about living as a son or daughter in God's family?* Use the journaling pages at the back of the manual to journal any insights you are gaining or questions that are surfacing or prayers that are stirring as a result of your reading. Be prepared to share your thoughts and discoveries with your group and/or mentor.

### ***Part 2 – Read and Prepare for Stage 2, Session 1: Called to Community***

Read and complete the questions in Session 1 of Stage 2. Be prepared to share your discoveries with your group.



SESSION TWO:

# Living Gratefully

## *Invitation & Prayer*

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.

And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;

teach and admonish one another in all wisdom;

and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:15–17

We are surrounded by God's benefits.

The best use of these benefits is an unceasing expression of gratitude.<sup>1</sup>

John Calvin

(1509–1564)

A thankful life is a response to seeing life as a gift from God  
and realizing that our lives belong to God.<sup>2</sup>

Don Postema

When we learn to read the story of Jesus and see it as the story of the love of God,  
doing for us what we could not do for ourselves—  
that insight produces, again and again,  
a sense of astonished gratitude  
which is very near the heart of authentic Christian experience.<sup>3</sup>

N.T. Wright



## *Prayer of Examen*

*You who know me so well, God; search me yet again and lead me in your way.* Use the space on this page to respond to four parts of the examen:

- *Where were you most grateful this week? (What gave you life?)*
- *Where were you least grateful this week? (What drained you?)*
- *What is God inviting you to notice?*
- *Convert your thoughts into a written prayer.*





## Overview

This session will explore the dynamics and practices of a community rooted in gratefulness.

I. A Story of Grace

II. Gratitude

## Focusing Question

- When was the last time you experienced a deep and overwhelming sense of gratitude?

## Instruction & Reflection

Do we find it difficult to imagine  
that gratefulness could ever become  
our basic attitude toward life?<sup>4</sup>

David Steindl-Rast

Many of us know that the best times of our lives have been times spilling with gratitude. Life just seems to make more sense when we are thankful. In those times, we hurry back like the healed leper to find Jesus (Luke 17)—we simply must give thanks to the one to whom we are indebted! A grateful heart seems to be a door that lets us in on a host of other human experiences: generosity and love and reconciliation and forgiveness and freedom and laughter. Gratitude bridges the distances within our hearts, releases its gears, and frees us to live. Gratitude makes our ears to hear, our eyes to see, and our hearts to understand. Gratitude makes us alive to God and to others.

Yet we must confess that too often we identify more with the nine lepers who did not return to Jesus with thanks (Luke 17). Our bad sight and poor hearing and hard heart frustrate and distract us. In such times, we know thankfulness only as a courtesy, an expression of good manners—a child's response to a parent's prompting, "Now what do you say?" Somewhere along the way, we lose a sense of surprise, of wonder, and

we replace these instead with entitlement, complaint, and insecurity. Living day after day and week after week with very little sense of gratitude can lead our spirits into dead-ends on the journey.

Our church communities so often fall short of embodying gratefulness as a basic attitude toward God and one another. And so we strain our relationships. And we become untrusting. And we allow ourselves to feel disappointed. And we even become idolatrous. Lack of gratitude certainly tells of a life that does not understand or experience God's grace. We preach it and teach it—but do we *know* it?

## I. A Story of Grace

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons."

Luke 15:11

### A. A younger son's experience

It is a long walk home. Desperate. Starving. Ashamed. Afraid. Exhausted. This is a dying man's journey.

He is a realist. He understands that, several years back when he demanded his share of the inheritance from his father, he had forfeited a great deal; in fact, he had in essence wished his father dead. So his departure had not just been a geographical move: he had left behind his role and responsibilities, his rightful and given place in the world.

Now, on his way home again, he passes the fields and hills and towns he walked by years earlier, his mind now tugging back and forth between despair and hope.

*His despair.* He dreads the likelihood of complete rejection by the community. His choices have dishonored his father, scandalized his brother, shocked the town. History tells us that when a wayward Jewish son returned home having squandered his property in Gentile lands, a community would gather and collectively turn their back on this boy—a shunning. The young man knows—he will not be welcome. More than a family's disgrace, this is a community's shame.

*His hope.* But this despair is held back by the desperate hope of his father's lenience—in the form perhaps of a work contract. "Hire me out as a workman," he will say. He may be scorned, even beaten, but he may also be able to negotiate a solution. He survives now by this thought, this *hope*, of an arrangement. He may

never work back what he's lost, but he is desperate—he has to try. What other hope is there? Perhaps, in this way, he might restore some honor to the damaged family, and in part maybe he can again be reconciled to them. This is his final strategy.

He makes the long walk home, tired, desperate, afraid.

But what is this? What is this reception? Father! The old man comes to him, runs to him. And Father's embrace. And Father's kiss. And here, a robe, a ring. Here, a feast, a celebration. Bring the fattened calf! Come!

And Father's words. "This son of mine was dead and is alive again."

And Father's compassion. It transforms this young man's whole vision of the world. Such a reception is *utterly unimaginable*, and yet here it is. It is happening. It has happened!

This is grace.

### **B. An older son's experience**

Such a reception is *utterly unimaginable*, yes—it is his worst nightmare coming true.

This man returns home from a day's work to discover that his scandalously arrogant younger brother has returned home—and, what is this, Father has inexplicably reconciled with him! Years earlier, this little brother shamefully demanded his inheritance—and while Father was still alive! Even worse, Father even agreed to the younger one's demand, and together this good son and Father watched while the younger one up and left.

And, while his family was mocked throughout the community, the good and righteous son remained. What father allows his son to behave so disrespectfully? It was a scandal. At the time, the good son thought Father should have refused the request. Further, the younger one should have been beaten. But the good son said nothing. Instead, in order to restore the family's honor, he worked dutifully for years and years.

So this honorable, this good, this righteous son arrives home—sweaty, exhausted, having finished his work in the field—and he is shocked and offended by the news: Father has received home—honorably, no less—the starving and barely recognizable younger brother who squandered all he had.



The good son can make no sense of Father's actions. Reconciliation should come only at a cost from the wayward son. Shame upon shame will be heaped onto their family! He is overwhelmed, confused, frustrated, ashamed—even lonely, and angry, and jealous.

He refuses the celebration. He won't go near their feast, even as a public refusal would deeply dishonor Father and family, and even as by all rights Father should have him beaten for refusing. Still, he cannot help himself!

He demands an explanation. He calls out to his father. "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed a command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

His speech is finished, fists clenched, body shaking. He has moved from confusion to shame to indignation. He stands tall, upright—but afraid before his father. He waits for Father's anger. He waits for rejection.

Instead, this father speaks tenderly.

"My son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

This, too, is grace.

### **C. Our response**

This story of grace asks of us more than just our thoughts, our conjectures, our insights, or our admiration. It reaches across 2,000 years to demand our response. Have we encountered God like this? If so, have we embraced our father's grace? Have we resisted it?

Some of us know the experience of the dying younger son. We walk toward horizons of lingering dread and small hopes. We resign ourselves to merely *surviving* in the world, our imaginations shrunken by the weight of life. We have lost hope along the way. Then God encounters us in one of his myriad forms, exposing our narrow vision of reality, ushering us into a new and wholly unexpected place in the world—a beautiful place, a wonderful place, which is grace. And, from the core of our being, gratitude spills out. We were dead and here we experience the gift of new life—a second start.

Others of us are more like the older son. We never leave “home.” We are very familiar with the landscape of the local church. We know its world of duty and loyalty, of respect and friendliness. We live “in the field,” working hard, building up the sometimes-damaged reputation of the family, the local church, the kingdom. We know kindness and conformity, keeping the peace and pleasing others. We recognize how to stay out of trouble and we help others do the same thing. This is our way in the world.

But, in truth, much of the time we struggle to recognize and receive grace in our own lives. While we know all the stories of mercy and forgiveness, we are nonetheless brutal with ourselves. We cannot accept our own failures. We feel anxiety and shame. Often, our self-condemnation motivates our fortitude; we act apparently courageous to somehow account for the disappointment we feel about ourselves. We would never dare verbalize the expectations and demands that our own conscience sometimes puts on us. And in all honesty, we wonder whether, apart from our goodness and our performance, we will ever really be loved. What do we really *know* of grace and gratefulness deep within our hearts?

Grace is *un-anticipate-able*—we are never ready for it. It surprises, scandalizes, disarms, blindsides, and embraces us. Anne Lamott writes, “It is unearned love—the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It’s the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.”<sup>5</sup> This is the way of God’s gracious and creative presence in the world. In difficult and desperate circumstances, we puzzle and strategize, we offer our “best thinking and most charming charm”—all to few results and much frustration—then we are mercifully met in unimaginable ways.

So much of how we relate to one another depends upon whether we open to this gracious and loving God who surprises us along the way. Is our life at its core filled with grace or un-grace? Now certainly there are shades in between these poles, for there is much of God’s abundant grace that we all have to grow into, but this basic understanding of life—grace or un-grace—is reflected in the way we live and walk together. Living gratefully with God and with others begins and is sustained by a consciousness of God’s gracious way with us and through us. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

## *Reflect & Respond*

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- To what degree do you identify with the younger son's story? The older son's story? How so?
- If one doesn't see grace as the primary storyline of one's life what are the alternatives for other storylines or themes?
- Recall an experience in your life when you were deeply grateful to someone or to God. Discuss the role of grace or gift in that moment.



## II. Gratitude

We are created and redeemed to give thanks. Throughout his letters Paul teaches that thanksgiving should characterize a Christian's life (Philippians 4:6; Colossians 2:7; 3:17; 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 5:18); and should be the mark of corporate worship (1 Corinthians 14:16f; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:1).<sup>6</sup>

Theologian Karl Barth wrote, "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning....[W]e are speaking of the grace of God who is God for [us], and of the gratitude of [humankind] as [our] response to this grace.... Radically and basically all sin is simply ingratitude—[human] refusal of the one but necessary thing which is proper to and is required of [those] with whom God has graciously entered into covenant."<sup>7</sup>

Gratitude is the hallmark of godly women and men. They are acutely aware of their own waywardness and consequent need for forgiveness, and they are ever mindful of the grace God has shown them. This is evident in a grateful spirit and a willingness to show forgiveness and grace to others. *Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lighting...*

### A. Hindrances to gratitude

Gratitude moves powerfully to deepen our relationships, but living gratefully has never been easy—or why else would Paul continue to urge the church toward it? Here are just a few dynamics worth our consideration, hindrances to gratitude. Be open to discussing other hindrances to gratitude that come to your mind.

#### 1. A high sense of entitlement

We live amidst a society with an overly developed sense of entitlement. And our fixation on "our rights" clearly erodes the social fabric of our communities, particularly when paired with a declining sense of responsibility for the common good. Christine Pohl writes:

Years ago, Paul Tournier observed that "no gift can bring joy to the one who has a right to everything." While there is a healthy interpretation of entitlement that is tied to a sense of dignity and equality, when it is exaggerated, it brings continual dissatisfaction and an inability to be thankful for anything.<sup>8</sup>

So much of our current preoccupation with what we are entitled to undermines a life of gratitude, because entitlement displaces our generous and just God from the center of our storylines. When we exaggerate the importance of our rights, we lose the joy of gratitude. One social researcher has put it starkly: “A sense of entitlement is a cancerous thought process that is void of gratitude and can be deadly to relationships, businesses, and even nations.”<sup>9</sup> Jerry Bridges elaborates at length on the impact entitlement can have on our lives and communities. In his book *Transforming Grace* he writes,

There is a very high sense of entitlement within modern society. Older people feel entitled to certain benefits from the government. Middle-aged people feel entitled to generous health and retirement benefits from their employers. Younger adults feel entitled to immediately enjoy the same standard of living their parents took years to achieve. And young people feel entitled to whatever material luxuries they desire....

[F]or Christians, such a high sense of entitlement is especially detrimental to our spiritual lives. For one thing, God is the ultimate supplier of all our needs and desires. Every good gift is from Him, regardless of the intermediate means through which that gift is supplied. As James said, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). However, God, through His providential workings, almost always uses some person or institution or other human instrumentality to meet our needs. Ultimately, though, He is the One who provides or withholds what we desire or think we need.

Therefore, a high sense of entitlement and expectations, though seemingly directed toward some person or institution, is actually directed toward God and His providential dealings in our lives.... It is bad enough, and certainly not very Christian, to have the attitude “The world owes me something just because I am,” but to have the attitude that God owes me something is exceedingly dangerous to spiritual health.<sup>10</sup>

We must grow, then, in our awareness of how much this cultural value of entitlement has misshaped our way of relating to God and others. By contrast, coming to see and embrace life as *fundamentally a gift* frees us to be truly ourselves. One person has said, “All of life is a gift, and we grow to be like Jesus as we embrace this gift.”<sup>11</sup> A life grounded in gratitude to God allows us to move more freely and courageously in community.

## **2. Greed and the need for more**

Many of us fear scarcity: there is simply not enough to go around, we convince ourselves. So greed becomes our strategy. Our sense of self depends on what we can acquire, get, grab hold of. We value our desire for more and more, even as our other values diminish. Yet a biblical portrait of the universe tells a different



There is no neutrality between gratitude and ingratitude. Those who are not grateful soon begin to complain of everything. Those who do not love, hate. In the spiritual life there is no such thing as an indifference to love or hate. That is why tepidity (which seems to be indifferent) is so detestable. It is hate disguised as love.

Tepidity, in which the soul is neither “hot or cold”—neither frankly loves nor hates—is a state in which one rejects God and rejects the will of God while maintaining an exterior pretense of loving Him in order to keep out of trouble and save one’s supposed self-respect. It is the condition that is soon arrived at by those who are habitually ungrateful for the graces of God. A man who truly responds to the goodness of God, and acknowledges all that he has received, cannot possibly be a half-hearted Christian....<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Merton  
(1915–1968)

story: abundance, not scarcity, grounds reality. Both of the sons in Luke 15 live with a mindset of scarcity, but their father lives out of a mindset of abundance. A generous God, a loving God, *this* is the fundamental truth of reality. Admittedly, we sometimes fail to recognize this truth, but when we embrace God’s abundant presence and provision, gratitude becomes our defining characteristic. We need communities that reflect open and receptive hands rather than grabby and closed fists. Our preoccupation with more and more, even the greed for many good things, can sabotage our life together. Ingratitude—or gratitude—eventually becomes a way of life.

### 3. Hidden resentment

So many of us can carry within us a sense of resentment that marks our relatedness with others. When a person feels as if she hasn’t received what she deserves, bitterness can fester, grow, and dominate her—both her outlook and relationships. A popular 12-step recovery slogan puts it like this: “Resentment is like drinking the poison and waiting for the other person to die.” And when this dynamic of resentment remains unaddressed, a life rooted in gratitude becomes thoroughly frustrated. As we explored earlier in the Luke 15 story, the older son discovered—in perhaps the most honest moment of his life—the full force of his resentment when his younger brother returned home and he exploded at his father. But his father’s gracious reaction to both his embittered outburst and his runaway brother called into question his basic attitude toward life: is the father’s love something that can be actually earned? Henri Nouwen explores this contrast between life and love as things *earned* and things *given*. He writes,

My identification with the elder son has made me aware of the enormous spiritual difference between working my whole life long to earn the equality, love, and friendship that I need in my primary relationships and of living these relationships out of gratitude for the boundless, gratuitous gifts that shower down upon my life. In the former, my refusal to accept that I am already loved destroys trust and corrodes my heart, while in the latter, my difficulties become opportunities to trust even more that love will carry me toward my mature humanity. I have the ability to respond to my relational difficulties from two points of view and I must choose my direction. Either I say, “Watch me, God, and see how much I’m working for you. Don’t you think you should finally love me?” or I say, “Oh loving Creator, thank you for gifting me with life and with unconditional love. Help me to continuously be grateful for your generosity and trust that you are always with me to help me to love.”<sup>12</sup>

Life in community leaves so many of us feeling exhausted, overlooked, and disillusioned. We live self-protectively. Hidden deep within us is a persistent resentment, for how many have failed to really appreciate who we are and what we have done for them? This hidden resentment is the emotional residue seeking to earn what can only be given—the sort of loving acceptance that God freely and unconditionally



gives. Unless we get to the crux of the matter—life as gift or life as just deserts—we will continue to stymie and suffocate our communities with unrealistic expectations and controlling behavior. A deep sense of gratitude counters such hidden resentment.

#### **4. Envy**

Envy, and its insidious comparing, remains a critical barrier to the development of Christian community. Just as tensions arose 2,000 years ago when the disciples quarreled over who was greatest (Mark 10:35–45), so today such sentiments continue to remain just under the surface of our social contexts. In board meetings and around dinner tables, supermarkets and malls, sporting events and local neighborhoods, elementary schools and universities, we muscle through to get our way, a way most often determined by intense comparison with others. Basil the Great (4th century) described the plight of the envious person found in “the pain that arises from another’s good fortune. And because of this the envious man is never without pain, never without grief of mind.”<sup>14</sup> In so many ways we interpret what we have as never enough, as always lacking when compared to So-and-so over there. For such insecure attitudes torment the person who holds them. Envy is not a small thing and must not be treated as benign. By seeking out power over love, it celebrates weakness and vulnerability in others, and it persistently undermines trust, servant-hood, and gratitude—key elements envisioned in the biblical portraits of fellowship.

#### **5. Distraction**

Much has already been mentioned throughout *A Way of Life* about our need to live attentively in the world, but it bears repeating again: we can live such distracted lives. Sitcoms and baseball games, doctor’s appointments and beauty magazines, laptops and hurricane updates and piano recitals, beer ads, Bible studies—all of these clamor, crowd, and compete for our attention. “We are very distractible people in a very distracting world,” writes Leighton Ford.<sup>15</sup> We so rarely exercise an undivided attention. Our distracted minds seem to have little space for the things that matter most to us, the things that actually need our undivided attention. “Our capacity for gratitude is not connected with an abundance of resources but rather with a capacity to notice what it is that we do have,” writes Christine Pohl.<sup>16</sup> When we fail to regularly reflect upon what we are thankful for, we lose sight of both the gifts and the givers in our lives.



In normal life we hardly realize how much more we receive than we give, and life cannot be rich without such gratitude. It is so easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements compared with what we owe to the help of others.<sup>18</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
(1906–1945)

### *Reflect & Respond*

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- *What hindrances to gratitude might you add to these five (entitlement, resentment, envy, complaining, greed, and distraction)?*
- *How do you see these dynamics as impacting what you have experienced within a church community?*
- *How has someone with a critical spirit affected your basic outlook on life? How has someone with a grateful spirit affected your basic attitude toward life?*

### **B. Cultivating gratitude**

“When it comes to life the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude,” writes G.K. Chesterton.<sup>17</sup> Because we have a natural tendency to take things for granted, cultivating gratitude requires developing mindsets and habits that challenge this tendency. The Apostle Paul implores the church in Thessalonica to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18). Within the everydayness of our lives, how can we learn to approach life with gratefulness in all things?

## 1. Prayer of examen

Throughout *A Way of Life* we have been practicing the prayer of examen. Central to this practice is an intentional attentiveness to gratitude. We have structured our prayerful review in light of two questions: *For what moment this week was I most grateful? least grateful?* This practice of prayer allows us to get in touch with our sense of life-as-gift. Amidst the everydayness of our lives, we seek God's gracious presence and direction. For some of us who are more optimistic in temperament, we are invited to pay attention with God to those negative things in life we tend to habitually deny or ignore; for we who are more pessimistic, we need help noticing what has gone right. For both, the prayer of examen can instruct us in the practice of honestly welcoming feelings and experiences, both positive and negative, in the light of God's presence and activity. What might God be inviting us to pay attention to?

When this prayerful review leads us to negative emotions—whether they are associated with a consciousness of our sins, or with an awareness of the sinfulness of the world—we must be particularly attentive to how God might be inviting us to grow. We pray again, “You who know me so well, God; search me yet again and lead me in your way.” As Anthony de Mello writes, “Be grateful for your sins. They are carriers of grace.”<sup>19</sup> Or as John wrote, “Whenever our hearts condemn us” we must recognize that “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (1 John 3:20). One of wonderful realities of God is that his love for us is realistic; he knows the condition of our hearts better than we do. So the prayer of examen nurtures a shared way of life with God; we learn to seek and find God in all things. God is utterly good, is *with us* in a way that creatively weaves and redeems, according to his purposes and our good (Romans 8: 26–29). So often we discover within the disruptions of our lives and communities—those confusing and sometimes painful moments of disorientation—invitations to know God more deeply and serve him and others more gracefully. We discover gratitude and praise where we thought there could only be misery, complaint, and despair.

Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn include in their book *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* other versions of the examen questions that they've found helpful:

When did I give and receive the most love today?

When did I give and receive the least love today?

When did I feel most alive today?

What did I most feel life draining out of me today?

When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging...?

When did I have the least sense of belonging?

When was I happiest today?

When was I saddest today?

What was today's high point?

What was today's low point?<sup>20</sup>

If some of these other versions of examen questions resonate with you, then add or substitute them in your weekly review. Many have found it extremely helpful to practice this prayer every evening. Our prayer practice as *A Way of Life* group will remain a weekly review, but some of you may find it extremely beneficial to integrate this prayer of examen into an evening prayer each night, in order to cultivate a deeper gratefulness in your life.

*Reflect & Respond* \_\_\_\_\_

- What have you discovered about yourself through this prayer of examen practice in *A Way of Life*?



## 2. Resisting a culture of complaining

Now certainly there is a proper place for complaint that expresses truthful living. The psalms of lament reflect such honesty in the community and with God. However, what is concerning here, and what is perhaps symptomatic of elements we have already mentioned (e.g. entitlement and resentment), is when grumbling becomes a primary way of relating and communicating with others. There is a difference between someone voicing dissatisfaction and somebody who has taken on dissatisfaction as a way of life, murmuring that things are never good enough nor will ever be good enough. This second sort of person can become infectious in a community, paralyzing others efforts toward building a more trusting and loving culture.

Few things erode the spirit of a community like unchecked complaining. Grumbling and murmuring must be confronted and addressed so that they do not infect the entire character of our relational life together. Christine Pohl writes,

Communities in which grumbling has become a major issue may find it helpful to address the problem directly, and to set aside times in which people are invited to articulate their frustrations and suggest what would make things better. When people are challenged to be explicit about problems and to expose their complaints in the light of public discussion, all can see more clearly whether the complaining is justified.<sup>21</sup>

It is helpful to provide venues for the community to express their perspectives or frustrations. For in some cases there may be justification for the complaint, while in other cases, upon reflection and discussion, the complaint may not be justified. It is a generalized mood of complaining that becomes most tiresome, an obstacle to a spirit of thanksgiving. We must lovingly confront and resist this sort of mood both within our own hearts and with in our communities.

## 3. Nurturing a sense of wonder

Psychologist Dan Allender points out that our character grows to the degree that we nurture a sense of gratitude or awe in our lives. He elaborates on this point by way of a story.

To those who have eyes of gratitude, all senses are freed to take in and participate in the smallest and most obscure as well as the most panoramic displays of beauty. Gratitude also frees the heart to suffer fury against that which mars beauty. Gratitude brings an imminent passion to all endeavors of life.



### AN EXERCISE

Notice your tendency to make comparisons that result in feelings of dissatisfaction or entitlement. Practice abstaining from comparative statements about what you don't have. Instead give thanks for what you do have.<sup>22</sup>

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun



Worship with people in the church is one way we give public thanksgiving. The church is the place where we realize and celebrate that we belong to God, that God has acted redemptively for us. The church is the body of Christ, the place where the covenant is actualized, the covenant community. The church is also a place where gratitude can be encouraged and where gestures of thanks can be learned, nourished, and expressed.<sup>24</sup>

Don Postema

Consider this sharply contrasting picture: I recall being at a birthday party for a five-year-old terror who snatched his gifts from his mother and opened them with wanton disdain. He'd see what he had received, toss it down as if it were of no account, then move on to another present. His mother wanly tried to stop his juggernaut by saying, "Isn't that wonderful, honey? Why don't you say thank you to Uncle Joe and Aunt Susan?" The boy had no gratitude, in part because nothing brought him surprise and awe. His sense of being owed the good things in life prevented him from being delighted by the undeserved gifts he was receiving. It is impossible to be truly grateful without having some sense of awe.<sup>23</sup>

**How often we can we relate some aspect of our lives to this five-year-old boy's experience? How closed off we can become to being surprised by life in general and by God's gracious movement in particular!**

*How open we are to being surprised?*—this question may help us take inventory on our heart. Some of us, because we don't want to get hurt again, try to gain such firm control of our lives; in so doing, however, we muscle out any sense of anticipation or wonder. We stop asking, *What is God up to next?* Self-protection, not gratefulness, has become our primary orientation. Sadly, in our efforts to control we close ourselves off not just to possibilities of bad or evil in life, but also possibilities of the good and generous. We must learn, then, to pray, "Lord, help me release control of my life and be open to your surprises along the way." May we become freed up to be amazed by life and live a life of gratefulness.

#### **4. Writing notes of gratitude**

One simple practice that many have found beneficial to cultivating gratefulness in their lives is the simple practice of regularly writing small notes of thanks to people who come to mind. These are not long letters, but rather short notes of affirmation and gratitude that come from a sincere heart. Perhaps it is friend who we have taken for granted. Perhaps it is a business in your community that has consistently provided you and/or your family good service and you want to drop a short note of thanks to the business owner. Or it simply could be a teacher of one of your children or grandchildren to whom you simply want to say, "Thanks, I appreciate you and your work."

This practice requires attentiveness and intentionality to, as the old hymn puts it, "counting one's blessings." So often, opportunities to give thanks come to mind, but we hesitate or minimize the importance of saying so, and consequently we don't do anything. So we learn regularly to reflect upon our day or week, then drop a note to someone who comes across our radar. This discipline can move us beyond our many good intentions. Some attach this discipline to an evening meal in which a family may reflect together upon who and what they are thankful for; and then they compose a short and sincere note to that person. Such gratitude can inject life into both the receiver and the giver. Gratitude is contagious. Both kids

and adults can share in this practice. It is helpful to always have a set of cards or notes on hand for this purpose.

### *Reflect & Respond*

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- What gratitude do you hold onto that you have not expressed? Are there some people you need to say thanks to? Exercise: Get some stationary and write to two or three people a handwritten note expressing your gratitude before the next session.

## *Prayer*

Gracious God,  
Your love puts no condition and knows no limits.  
It embraces and envelops us totally,  
like the air we breathe.  
It is life-giving in the most profound sense of the word.  
Grant us grace to believe with all our hearts.  
May this faith shape and permeate our personalities  
and may it bear rich fruit in self-acceptance  
and love of our neighbor.  
Let us become living witnesses of your love and truth  
and give you honor and glory.  
We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord,  
In whom all your love was revealed.<sup>25</sup>

*Peter van Breeman*

## *In Preparation for Session 3*

### ***Part 1 – Bible Reading and Journaling: Gospel of John***

For next week, read and reflect upon John 9:1–10:42. In addition to simply paying attention to what grabs you within the passage, ask a couple focused questions: *What does this passage tell me about Jesus' relationship with the Father? What can I learn from Jesus' relationship with the Father, about living as a son or daughter in God's family?* Journal any insights you are gaining or questions that are surfacing or prayers that are stirring as a result of your reading. You will find pages for this journaling at the back of the manual. Be prepared to share your thoughts and discoveries with your group and/or mentor.

### ***Part 2 – Mutual Mentoring Groups***

Be sure to connect with your group about when you will be meeting next week. Some will meet prior to the normal session time to touch base with one another. Our purpose with these groups is simply to *care for one another* as companions on this journey: we will listen to one another, ask questions of one another, and pray for one another.

### ***Part 3 – Read and Prepare for Session 3: Living Truthfully***

Read and complete the questions in Session 3: *Living Truthfully*. Be prepared to share your discoveries with the group.